



# BONDED FOR LIFE

NOBODY SAID “HAPPILY EVER AFTER” WAS EASY, BUT THESE TIPS SHOULD HELP YOU KEEP YOUR MARRIAGE IN TIP-TOP SHAPE

By Eric Butterman

In your profession, a scoreboard tells you whether you've won or lost. But when it comes to your marriage, it's not so clear-cut. You're on the road half the time, and many times the distance is paved with loneliness and groupies—not a good combination. But it doesn't have to be that way. There are plenty of professional athletes living in wedded bliss. Like everything else, however, such contentment takes hard work.

“There's only one difference between athletes who want to keep a marriage together and everyone else who wants the same thing,” says Dr. Bert Diamant, a psychologist who has worked with individuals and couples for more than 30 years. “Because of the road, athletes may have to try a little harder during the time they have with their spouse.”

Diamant says one of the key ways to do this is to **find your partner's love map**. “A love map is what your partner likes and dislikes when it comes to their activities,” he says. “Think of the contestants on ‘The Newlywed Game.’ The winners know a lot about their partners, right? Well, those are love map experts.”

It also helps to **be a good listener**, advises the doctor. While on the road, show your spouse that you were attentive during your previous phone conversation. For instance, if your spouse said she was going to a movie, ask how she liked the flick the next time you talk. On the flip side, the spouse should do his or her part as well. “The athlete should be made to feel that they're more than the breadwinner and more of a life partner,” says Diamant.

One wife of a former NFL player told us that the only dirt she had on her husband was in his cleats. “One advantage you have as a football player's wife is that your husband isn't on the road more than once a week,” she says. “But other wives I've spoken to have had problems.”

The NFL wife, who declined to give her name, believes that **spouses need to be as secure as they can**—whether there's someone else in the picture or not—or it may cause some rough times. “The athlete needs to show his wife what she means to him to help make her feel more secure,” she suggests. “My husband shows me love with respect. He doesn't keep late hours at the clubs very often, just as I don't. He also took me with him to most places when he played, and still does. When couples aren't a regular part of each other's lives, that's when bad things happen.”



### YOUR CHEATING HEART

Some athletes take more dramatic steps to show their spouses their commitment. Take Doug Christie of the Dallas Mavericks and his wife, Jackie. When the veteran guard/forward puts out hand signals during games, it's not necessarily to call a play for his teammates; in fact, it's usually a call-out to his wife. They've found their own way to tell each other "I love you," and have created smaller gestures to communicate such messages as "keep your chin up."

Then there's Mets pitcher Kris Benson and his pin-up wife Anna. They

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pride themselves on having a healthy sex life—so healthy, in fact, that Anna doesn't mind sharing it with the media. And if her husband strays, Anna's been quoted as saying she'll have sex with practically everyone on his team.

The NFL wife we talked to agrees that this kind of **playful banter** is **helpful**—to an extent. "I let my husband know I'm still a hottie," she laughs. "It reminds us how lucky we both are."

Of course, cheating is a real temptation for athletes, but Diament reminds us that it's a temptation for anyone who's married. "If the athlete respects their spouse enough," he says, "they just won't cheat. To create this idea that athletes somehow have it tougher than everyone else and it's okay to cheat is ridiculous. But to fantasize, on the other hand, that's natural."

You hear it every day from the divorced: "I didn't see it coming." Although some marriages are doomed from the start, many can be salvaged if you **address the warning signs early in the game**. Among those signs, Diament notes, is the old stonewalling tactic, in which neither spouse wants to talk about problems in the marriage.

But like other problems in life, the first step to fixing a bad marriage is to admit you have one. Then **acknowledge your own defenses**. For example, perhaps you overreact when your spouse does some specific thing that annoys you. The next time you want your spouse to do something that he or she is not doing, try playful humor—not anger or cynicism. Remember, Dr. Diament says, it takes two.

Finally, try to **accept your spouse for who they are** as much as possible. According to Diament, research shows that 67 percent of conflicts between happily married people are over things neither person could change about each other. So focus on the other 33 percent, and there's a good chance you'll stay 100 percent married for years to come.

